

HOW CAN I DESIGN A GOOD USER INTERFACE FOR MY VN?!



A Ren'Py Reference Guide v1.0

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INTRODUCTION

Hi, I'm NomnomNami!

I've been making games with Ren'Py since 2013.

This pdf was written for visual novel developers of all skill levels, as a quick and easy set of guidelines so your game can be more easily read by players!

Although it's focused on Ren'Py specifically, a lot of this can be applied to other engines as well. Whatever kind of game you're making, I hope some of the design knowledge collected here can help you out!

With that said, none of these things are hard and fast rules. I don't think MY OWN games even follow all the guidelines in this thing... Different games have different design needs, and when you're making art, it can be good to break the rules! ...As long as you know why those rules exist, first.

Mostly, I just wanted to highlight some common pitfalls I've seen in the indie VNs that I've played. I wanna help you improve your games...! Whether you're a hobbyist making fangames or a seasoned pro hoping to improve a little... I hope some part of this guide can be useful to you!

Thank you so much for reading!



-Nami

FONTS

Choosing the right font for your VN is EXTREMELY IMPORTANT!! Your story is mainly communicated in text... so you're gonna want people to be able to read that easily! It's a barrier to engagement otherwise.

Serif?

or sans serif...?

BUT I WANNA BE UNIQUE!!!

as long as it's not something like this lol

WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN CHOOSING YOUR FONT

In a word... readability!!

Simple fonts might feel a bit boring, but they're usually the way to go! Try to save fancier fonts for labels and headings. If you're worried the font you chose isn't readable enough, you could always provide the option to [change to a simpler font ingame](#), too.

I personally use a custom font based on my handwriting (which I made using [calligraphr!](#)) So if you feel your handwriting is legible enough and want to add that personal touch, I say go for it!! (Though, fair warning, making your own font can lead to quite a bit of extra work!)

For a list of font suggestions that can really make a difference for readers with dyslexia, please check out [this link](#).

- To change your game's font, look for `gui.text_font` in `gui.rpy`
- You can change the styles of specific elements in `screens.rpy` too

FONT SIZING

Tiny text isn't very fun to read in large amounts... so, please...

Make sure your text takes up some decent screen space!!

There's no exact number for what size text your dialogue should be displayed in, because the size of the letters varies between fonts. (My personal font is kinda small compared to Ren'Py's default, so I tend to make all the numbers a bit bigger...)

If your game is easy to read on a computer screen, what about a smartphone? Whether or not you actually plan on doing a mobile version, you might as well save yourself the work of re-adjusting your whole interface by just making your font sizes big enough in the first place... you know, just in case... what can it hurt, really?

- To change your font sizes, look for `gui.text_size` in `gui.rpy`
- You can change the styles of specific elements in `screens.rpy` too

COLORS!

Whether you choose dark text on a light background, or decide to go **light on dark**... Contrast is key!!

The font/UI colors you pick should ultimately go with the aesthetic of your game. As long as the text is readable against the art behind it, you're good to go, honestly.

But if you go with light on dark, it's nice to include an option to switch to dark on light, since that can be generally easier to read for dyslexic people! (White text on a black background can appear really bright and blurry... oh, like little stars in the sky...)

- To change your default text color, look for `gui.text_color` in `gui.rpy`
- You can change the styles of specific elements in `screens.rpy` too
- To change the color associated with certain characters, check the [Ren'Py documentation](#).

ADD OUTLINES!!

Outlines are your friend! If you need an extra bit of contrast, they can make a huge difference. If you really like the text color you picked out, but it's just not quite working... outlines can solve your problem!

- Add this line to `gui.rpy` for a simple 1px black outline:
`define gui.dialogue_text_outlines = [(1, "#000", 0, 0)]`
- You can change the `0,0` part of that to `1,1` for an easy drop shadow!

IT'S ALL ABOUT ACCESSIBILITY!

When it comes right down to it, there's only one goal for all of this... for the maximum amount of people to be able to enjoy our games!!

Ren'Py has a built-in accessibility menu--by pressing the 'a' key, players can change the font, font size, and line spacing. You can even add an onscreen button to your game to pull up this menu with the help of npckc's [Caption Tool!](#) (It has lots of other features too, so check it out!)

For more generalized information and tips, please watch Mark Brown's YouTube series, [Designing for Disability](#). Not all of it will apply to indie VNs, but it's got tons of really great info for those who care about this stuff (which you totally should)!

TEXTBOXES

Your textbox matters a lot... because the player is going to be looking at it through the whole game! A lot of VNs use a simple gradient, but it's fun to draw something special, too. (I like to anyway...)

YOUR TEXTBOX AESTHETIC

Art-wise, your textboxes can be anything... they're an extra space to communicate something about your game's world! But there's nothing wrong with sticking with something more basic either. Clean and minimal might fit your game best, after all.

But I do have one tip that I feel applies to most VNs... and that's to make your textboxes semi-transparent! It kinda sucks to totally cover up like a third of your screen (assuming we're in ADV-mode)... So just let me see behind it at least a little... and hey, minute's [accessibility add-on](#) includes a textbox transparency slider so players can adjust the opacity to suit their needs!

If you're totally lost on what to do for your UI, [just look at how other VNs do it!](#) Don't feel bad taking inspiration from your favorite games :)

ADV-MODE TEXTBOXES



The classic setup! A couple of characters against a background, with a textbox to hold their dialogue at the bottom. There's a thousand ways to do it, but what you're really looking for is a nice balance.

Here's a mockup for how to split up your screen space (16:9 aspect ratio)

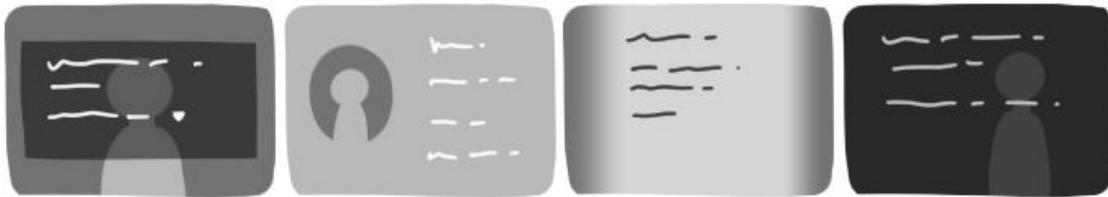


I try to keep characters' heads in the same general region--far enough above the text box that you can see their face clearly, but not so far above the first line of text that your eye doesn't catch when they change expression.

The text doesn't need to go all the way to the edge of the screen. The longer a line is, the harder it can be to parse! So it's better to keep it centered like this. Even if the art for the textbox extends to the edges, your text doesn't need to! (Ren'Py is set up this way by default anyway, I'm just sayin'... don't change it back...!)

On that note, it's always nice to leave a bit of room between the textbox and the bottom edge of the screen. If you have a quick menu, that's usually where it'd sit anyway! But in the case of a missed bit of text overflow, the words would still be visible instead of going offscreen.

NVL-MODE TEXTBOXES



I don't have as much to say about NVL-mode, since I've only used it in my own games occasionally. But the usual setup is to have a dark (or light?) overlay covering the screen where the text will show up.

So mostly just try to keep the text away from the edges of the screen, and make sure the text stands out against all of your game's backgrounds and characters! It seems like thicker fonts would work better for this. And again, outlines/drop shadow!

- ADV-mode is the default, so if NVL-mode appeals to you, there's a [tutorial](#) in the documentation!

A NOTE ABOUT PACING



Try to limit each line of dialogue to one or two sentences. No one likes to be presented with a huge paragraph all at once. Breaking up the text into bite-sized chunks keeps your player more engaged in the story!

It's good practice to account for translations as well--some languages use a lot more characters to get their point across (German is usually the one to cause overflow issues for me!)

So break up lines where you can! And hey, maybe the character could use a change of expression while you're at it!

- To code a pause in dialogue, use the [text tag](#) {w}
- You can also write {w=.5} to pause for half a second before rolling out the rest of the text. Careful not to overuse these, though! Sometimes players will click not realizing more text was coming, and accidentally skip to the next dialogue, which feels frustrating...

THAT'S ALL FOR NOW!

Again, I hope some of this advice ends up being helpful. I've collected everything I linked to in this pdf in the resources section below. Thanks for reading all the way to the end!

-Nami

RESOURCES

Calligraphr (custom font maker)

<https://www.calligraphr.com/en/>

Caption Tool for Ren'Py (by npckc)

<https://npckc.itch.io/caption-tool-for-renpy>

Dyslexia Font and Style Guide

<https://www.dyslexia-reading-well.com/dyslexia-font.html>

Lemma Soft Forums (for help with Ren'Py!)

<https://lemmasoft.renai.us/forums/>

Making Games Better for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Designing for Disability (by Game Maker's Toolkit)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NGe4dzlukc>

Ren'Py Accessibility Add-On (by minute)

<https://minute.itch.io/renpy-accessibility>

Ren'Py Documentation (ESSENTIAL coding resource)

<https://www.renpy.org/doc/html/index.html>

Visual Novel Interfaces tumblr (for design inspiration!)

<https://visual-novel-interfaces.tumblr.com/>